

Q: Speak on, right?

Man 1: Yeah, I just love <inaudible>. Okay. Perfect.

Q: Is that good?

Man 1: And we are-- camera's rolling, so <inaudible>.

Q: Okay. This is oral history number 414. The following oral history interview was conducted by Commander James Antonellis and Commander Bill Scallion for the National Park Service, USS Arizona Memorial at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, Hawaii, on December 6, 2001, at approximately 2:30 p.m. The person being interviewed is Mr. Robert H. Ehm, who was a machinist meat first class on the USS West Virginia on December 7, 1941. For the record, please, state your full name, your place of birth and your birth date.

Robert Henry Ehm: My name is Robert, H. for Henry, Ehm. Uh.. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, July the 3rd 1914.

Q: What did you consider to be your home town in 1941?

Robert Henry Ehm: Wilmington, Delaware.

Q: What were your parents' names?

Robert Henry Ehm: My parents' name was Charles A. Ehm, Sr., and my mother's name was Seline, S-E-L-I-N-E, S., uh.. Ehm.

Q: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Robert Henry Ehm: I had two brothers and two sisters. I was the number two son.

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Q: Where did you go to high school?

Robert Henry Ehrm: I went to high school, I'm a graduate of Wilmington Delaware High, Wilmington, Delaware.

Q: And where and why did you enlist in the Navy?

Robert Henry Ehrm: I enlisted in the Navy during the Depression, 1936 to, uh.. to get a job, and once I got into the Navy, I decided to make it a career, because that was a great outfit.

Q: Well, we're glad you think it's a good outfit, or a great outfit, as it is. Obviously, this is the 60th anniversary, sir. Where were you on the morning of December 7th?

Robert Henry Ehrm: I was, uh.. I was on-- in the machine shop on the West Virginia. We eight, uh.. eight different-- eight men from the machine shop slept in amongst our machines in those days. And, uh.. they had called me to go on watch, uh.. by mistake, because I was going on leave later that morning. And so, uh.. actually, I went up to the log room and complained about it, and when I settled down, I realized that, uh.. I would st- I told them I would stand the watch and let the guys sleep because it was Sunday morning, and uh.. I would stand the watch but to be sure to relieve me when my orders came through. And, I- I was fully dressed by this time, by when I assumed the watch. I had the third deck security watch. Uh.. first of all, nobody could get aboard ship, certainly couldn't get down below, and everybody that went into the engine room, the after engine room was cold iron, and the forward engine room was steam, and e- everybody had to pass me, and I had a .45. And, uh.. my messenger had a nightstick. He was also from the machine shop. And, uh.. we were there, uh.. on watch when they passed the word "Away [ph?] fire and rescue party." Our battle st- our fire and rescue party was in the machine shop. So, what we did, we turned the lights on. I kicked the bunks as I went forward and, uh.. told them "fire and rescue," and they said, "Okay. Tell 'em I'm here." So I reported the machine shop manned and ready for the fire and rescue party. But this plane coming low over the water did not crash into the water as the top side expected. It flew up over the ship and then she saw the rising sun on his wings. And, uh.. then they changed the word to "battle stations." And everybody down in the machine shop--I'm on watch, awake and everything--they said, "Hey, what's

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going on?" And about that time, the first torpedo hit. And when the torp- first time I ever heard a torpedo, and it was a concussion, no noise, it was a concussion and rush of air throughout the ship. And why the big guns were firing in port on a Sunday morning, I couldn't figure out. And, uh.. we had our work-- we had a work table in the center of the shop, and the ship would, with each succeeding explo- torpedo, it would lift the hip about 1 degree and drop it down 2 degrees. And work began to slide off of the table onto the deck. And we're picking this work up, putting it back on the table. And finally somebody says, "What the hell are we doing this for?" And about that time, the machine shop began to flood. The hatch going at the after end of the machine shop, uh.. led to the post office. And the letters and-- were coming down in this wall of water. So I hollered to my messenger to give me a hand, we'll close the ports and follow up way up through this cascade of water coming down. And I tried to close the- the, uh.. the port hole. It was a stream of water this big, and it was beginning to get dark in that comp- compartment already because the ship was- was sinking. And, uh.. couldn't do it, either the dogs got caught up or, uh.. I couldn't force it against the water, so I ducked under that cascade of water, tried the next one. And the next thing, I'm in broad daylight. Apparently, a torpedo had hit nearby, and it blew me clear, and I instinctively knew which way to go or what. And anyhow, I was top side by then, and I couldn't get back down anymore because that deck was completely flooded. And about that time, the Arizona, astern of us, and we were downwind, she blew up. And among other things, a roll of toilet paper was in the sky, and it snakes its way down in- into the water. And by this time, the Japanese are strafing, but I'm so fascinated by this toilet paper, I just stood there and watched it. So, by this time, I'm top side. And uh.. there wasn't anything I could do there. Uh.. but there were wounded around there, and we got life jackets we could, in case the ship sank, and- and- or turned turtle like the Oklahoma up ahead of us. And we put life jackets on as many as we could and moved them forward, because the Arizona w- the f- oil on the water and it-- fire was moving forward downwind. And finally, we got up to the bow, and uh.. was no place else to go, so these people, we threw them overboard, because at least they had a chance in the water, and they didn't aboard ship. We threw them overboard <sobbing>. And about that time-- up until then, I never saw any of our officers. I never heard, with the exception of the general quarters, I never heard any "abandon ship" or do this or do that. And, uh.. so I walked, I- I jumped down on that armor belt, 16-inch belt, and I walked aft hoping to, uh.. where the belts met and go up on the Tennessee, because our belts were touching. She was inboard of us. And I jumped down on the belt and I fell overboard. So, then...

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Q: So you fell between the West Virginia and the Tennessee.

Robert Henry Ehrm: West Virginia and Tennessee, yes. It was pretty far forward, and there was a lot of room there. I mean, it was all f- 20 feet to the- to the ship. I couldn't get back on the belt because of the list of the ship. And I, uh.. swam down--I'm a very poor swimmer--swam down to the anchor chain. There were about ten g- for some reason or other, the a- anchor was out. And, uh.. there were about ten guys hanging on the anchor and about ten guys hanging onto them. And I hung on there, too, wondered what to do next. And, uh.. the oil kept getting closer and closer, and hot. And, uh.. somebody says, "Hey, if we stay here, we're gonna burn up. Let's strike for shore." So we did. And, uh.. I found a piece of life raft, uh.. shattered life raft, piece of cork about 10 inches in diameter, and it was about 2 feet long, and another, a kid, young- young fellow, kid, he and I got on this piece of life raft and it-- I had a piece of stick, and he had a swab handle or something. We're paddling for shore like mad. And we can't get any closer to shore for some reason or other. W- the-- getting hotter and hotter. And I said, "Hey, I am gonna swim for it. I can't stay here any longer." So I jumped over off the raft, and the water was belt deep. We had grounded the damned thing. And to this day, I don't know what ha- happened to him. If he jumped off into deep water and I just never looked back, and I got off of the, uh.. got ashore. There's an automobile, a Dover ____, boy I'm safe from the strafing. And, uh.. I looked up about this close from the gas tank. I said, "Hey, this is not for me." So I started across the flying field, the airstrip at Ford Island, and being careful, the-- taking off planes wouldn't run over me, but, of course, they weren't taking off that morning. So, I got as far as I could to the far end of the island to get away from the burning ships. And, uh.. later in the morning, a truck came along and picking up survivors. "Hey, you, get in the truck." That's what it was. And they took us to the block arena, and, uh.. it was concrete. And, uh.. one of the things we did in those days, uh.. there was no recreation in Honolulu or anywhere, we used to grow a mustache, and mine was a cavalry type. And half of it caught on fire that morning. And I wanted to get a p- pair of scissors, so I went to the dressing station and, uh.. when I could get a word in edgewise-- there were wounded people there. S- so, a c- I asked a corpsman for a pair of scissors, and he gave me a pair of bandage scissors, and I'm trying to cut the remaining mustache off. And, uh.. another sailor said, "Hey, fellow, I'll help you." And he cut- cut my mustache off. That was the end of the cavalry type mustache from then on. <Laughing> Uh.. the next night, uh.. they were calling for volunteers. The San Francisco's going out, and she needs two machinist space and four water tenders, all volunteers report some place. But they said, "The following named men,"

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that's when I volunteered. And I went to the USS Warden. Uh.. the chief engineer happened to be the officer of the deck. We challenged, uh.. several times. Of course, at that time, everybody was shooting at everybody else that moved. So, chief engineer asked me my rate, and I told him. And he says, "You've got the port throttle, taking her out in the morning on the 4 to 8." No shoes, just a pair of trousers and a shirt, and uh.. s- somebody gave me a pair of shoes. Of course, they were a lot too-- steaming [ph?] shoes. They were a lot too big and everything, but at least the hot floor plates <laughing> it was better than-- better than nothing. And I had, uh.. I was on the Warden, and then they transferred me to the hull, DD350, and then I went to the, uh.. Whitney AD12, I think it was, and destroyer tender, and then I, uh.. was called back to the West Virginia as, uh.. in the salvage crew.

Q: When did that happen?

Robert Henry Ehm: Uh.. about May, but s- about May. I don't re- recall when it was. And, uh.. then I went back in the salvage crew. And, uh.. I- I asked a couple of the ship mates, "Hey, what do you guys do?" "Oh, we're divers." And, uh.. I didn't know whether they told the master diver or not, but anyhow, I became a tender. I learned-- and in those days, the telephones were terrible, mostly hand signals. And, uh.. so, then I became a- a tender. And one of the two divers that we had got in trouble. He was laying on his belly and air leaked in his back and he ends up in the wreckage of the engine room pipes and all that kind of stuff up-- and, uh.. so they pulled him down, got him brige side up and took him, uh.. and got him top side. And, uh.. the master diver says, "Hey, that's the last dive you'll ever make for me." The kid says, "Fine-- that's fine with me, chief." <Laughing> So, then he said, uh.. sent me over to the subbase to take pressure, uh.. in the, uh.. submarine rescue chamber there. When I went back to the ship, they started putting a suit on me. I was a diver. <Laughing>

Q: How many people were in the diving detachment? Because actually, the West Virginia, didn't she have her own normal diving?

Robert Henry Ehm: No. They-- no. The West Virginia did not have any divers. Or if they-- if there were any qualified divers on it, I didn't know about it. Of course, I was a machinist's mate, and in those days, the only people that were divers were bosun mates.

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Q: How many people were on this salvage crew, then?

Robert Henry Ehrm: Oh, it started out about 100 and it ended up with about 600 becau- we got a-- when the Yorktown got sunk at Midway, we got their survivors. And here, these guys, these av-

Q: That's a little bit later on. How many were right there with you in Pearl Harbor?

Robert Henry Ehrm: Two divers and about two tenders and, uh.. we called him a master diver, but he might have been a first or second class. And he was the chief. But the diving crew was about six, eight maximum.

Q: Where did you set up the diving station?

Robert Henry Ehrm: The- the- around a hatch leading down into the machine shop and eventually the engine room, right at the-- and we were careful not to step too close to that open hatch, uh.. because if you fell overboard and you're half dressed, Sayonara.

Q: And what type of rig were you diving?

Robert Henry Ehrm: What type of what?

Q: Of diving rig were you diving? Were you diving the mark five with the big brass helmet?

Robert Henry Ehrm: I have no idea, but it was a- it was a hardhat, and, uh..

Q: That's the mark-- that's the old mark five.

Robert Henry Ehrm: Is it? And it's, uh.. there was a stand-- I- as I recall, there were three sizes of suits, and uh.. the- the cuffs were about 6 inches wide and as small as I am, and uh.. we had a-- if you just pulled the cuff of them, then water leaked down that, and this rotten, stinking water. And, uh..

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so we had, like, an inner tube, and we called them snappers. And we put these snappers on. And if you got them too loose, water leaked in anyhow, and if you got them too tight, your hands got numb, which was much more serious, because when you're down and...

Q: About when did the diving on the West Virginia begin? What month?

Robert Henry Ehm: Uh.. I would say from May until June the following year, about one year.

Q: '42 [ph?]? In doing the dives, what was the usual visibility that you had?

Robert Henry Ehm: Absolutely nothing. That's one of the reasons I became a diver, because I had been aboard the ship for six years, and I knew my way around a lot of places in the darkness and, uh.. absolutely no visibility at all. Once you've got your head under water, Sayonara.

Q: What was the usual depth of the dives?

Robert Henry Ehm: Oh, we were- we were sunk in about 60 feet of water, so I would say about 50 feet was the maximum.

Q: And I think before you'd told me sometimes you dove solo and sometimes you dove with a diving buddy, and communications was ____ signals.

Robert Henry Ehm: Yes, yes. Uh.. to go s- down in the machine shop, that-that's all-- the forward engine room was approximately 100 feet, uh.. forward, and the other en- the after engine room was another 100 or 200 feet. So, on the deep dive, what we called deep dives, one diver would go down halfway, send a second diver down, they would shake hands, and then the first diver would keep on going down to do his work. And when he came back up, they, uh.. shook hands again, and then either one-- well, we had a routine. I forget whether the tender went up first or the diver. I don't recall that.

Q: What was the type of work you were doing? Was there a lot of cutting?

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Robert Henry Ehm: Very little cutting until the very last. It was-- what-- what the Navy did was to put 11 pumps down on the center line, and then we drained everything we could into this common sump. Like, it-- outboard of each engine room, there were four fire rooms, two on each side, and we had one pump down in this- in the, uh.. engine room, and we took the bonnets off of the main drain valves from the- from the, uh.. fire rooms, and- and then, w- when the pumps started, that not only dr- not only drained the engine room, but it drained the surrounding fire rooms. And the same way when the tur- at the turrets, the four turrets. We put a pump down and, uh.. the common sump, and then, uh.. we opened up the shell rooms and, uh.. magazines. The pump went down to the lower handling room, and when it started coming up, there was a lot of debris floating around, and these pumps would- would, uh.. clog, and they'd have to send a diver down to go and pull that stuff away. Pacific Bridge put a patch on the port side. They were, uh.. just like wooden bill boards. And at the turn of the bills, they put fast-drying concrete in there to accommodate the turn of the bilge and the wreckage down there. And then, uh.. the leaks, we Navy divers stuffed rags in there and that-- what we c- could find. And uh.. then we had to get up 32 feet, a draft of 32 feet to get over the sill of the dry dock. So eventually we got, uh.. into dry dock, took everything off of the ship, cleaned it, repaired what was necessary, mostly electric motors and that sort of thing, and to, uh.. the-- it was the all-electric drive. They were a big motor, big as this room, on each screw. They-- we had a center motor room with two motors in it and a wing engine-- uh.. wing motor rooms, uh.. on either side. They re-bladed the turbine to the alternator and they re- General Electric re-bladed or rewound the- the motors. And uh.. the ship's company did, uh.. all the f- feed pumps and- and, uh.. condensate pumps and that sort of thing.

Q: Back when you're down below, as we say, working, what were your concerns? Were you worried about the ship shifting as she lay on the bottom, worry about air hoses collapsing or getting ripped or crimping, wreckage becoming loose and falling on you?

Robert Henry Ehm: No. Uh.. the- the main concern, well, there are several concern- main concerns, one of which is to cut-- get your suit cut on the jagged steel wreckage. Not being able to see anything, you didn't know where you were going, and you had to be careful, too, uh.. in the wreckage, because if you stepped off an abyss where torpedo damage, it's liable to rip your air hose and lifeline off. And, uh.. then, uh.. th- those were- those were the main concerns. And also, when we got to, uh.. started on the turrets, uh.. on many of these rooms were shell rooms, and the powder magazines were

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dry. And, uh.. there was a test cap on the- these. In the old Navy, take the test cap off and screw a fire hose on there to safe the ship, flood the- the whatever it was. So, we were concern-- what-- right at the be- in the beginning, I don't know why, who- who discovered it or who did it, maybe the master diver, but anyhow, we would take these test caps off before opening a door, because if you opened the door, the rush of water might rip your air hose off. And, we'd take the test cap off, hold your hand up there, and if it, uh.. if it, uh.. stuck there, then you knew it was dry. We'd let it flood. We went back the next- next d- day and worked on it.

Q: How did you prepare yourself mentally to deal with the bodies that you came across?

Robert Henry Ehrm: There were bodies, I think a hundred and some- some bodies on there. We were concerned with the salvaging of the ship, not the bodies. But we got tangled up in- in a piece of line or, uh.. we'd pull on it and one end would be screwed in-- it'd be telephone-- one end would be screwed into the jack box, and the other end would be some guy with it still with the headphones on. And that was unnerving, too. But, uh.. we always tugged on w- which one, uh.. if it came easy, then you knew there was a guy there, so you pulled the other way, traced it out and screwed it out.

Q: When we were talking outside, before we came into the interview room, you had mentioned a situation with the pump room down below I'd like you to recount.

Robert Henry Ehrm: <sigh> Yes. There-- in- in the fresh water pump room, I- I've seen this in various accounts, and I talked to the master diver about it, too. The first couple of days, he said that he went around tapping on the hull, and there was no response. Everybody's dead. But when we pumped the ship down, in a pump, the pump room was dry, and there were three men in there, and they had marked off the calendar until the 24th of December. And one of the kids, Costen or Coster or something, worked for me in the machine shop. And when- when they found out about that, I didn't go down there. I just couldn't <sobbing>. But anyhow, two of them had pea coats on, and they had some crackers down there. Of course, they had all the fresh water that they needed, but uh.. apparently one survived the other two and laid them out on the floor plates, and uh.. then he just crumpled someplace. But, uh.. that was tragic. I don't know how we could have got them out of there

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because there were five decks of water above them, but the- the master diver said, "I'd have got 'em out." The fortunes of war, well, too bad.

Man 1: Mr. Ehm. I've been listening to your story, and I want to make sure that I understand, you were not a diver before December 7th, were you?

Robert Henry Ehm: No. No.

Man 1: You were a machinist mate.

Robert Henry Ehm: I was a- I was a machine shop machinist mate, the furthest- my further career, uh.. furthest expectation to be a diver. I had no-- I did not want to be a diver. I did not want to be. I was-- I'd never dove anywhere again in my entire naval career. I never played around with a SCUBA or-- never. It was-- I had- it- I could do it, so I did it <sobs>.

Man 1: And again, I understand they chose-- were you chosen to be a diver or did you volunteer?

Robert Henry Ehm: No. Chief said, "Go over to the subbase and take pressure." That's when I volunteered. <Laughing>

Man 1: And again, that's because you- you kind of touched on it <inaudible>.

Robert Henry Ehm: I- I figured I could do it. Wartime. So I did it. But I got paid extra, got 10 dollars a month for 6 months. And this other diver did not have 20/20 vision, so at the end of 6 months he was disqualified. Kept on diving, but he was disqualified. And, uh.. I got it for another ye- I got it for a total of one year.

Q: And the dives you made you were volunteered because of your familiarity with the machine spaces?

Robert Henry Ehm: Yes, uh.. the, uh.. chief engineer of the West Virginia survived, and he became the salvage officer. And, uh..

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Q: Who was the chief engineer?

Robert Henry Ehm: Le- Lieutenant Commander Levi J. Knight, class of I think it was 27 or something.

Q: Was there any reserve people on board?

Man 1: I'm sorry. This might be a good time to change tapes.

Robert Henry Ehm: Yes, the...

Q: I am going to come back to you because they're going to-- we're going to change tapes on you.

Robert Henry Ehm: Okay.

<Pause, test tone>

Q: How are you doing over there?

Woman 1: Fine, thank you.

Q: Okay. <Inaudible> <tone ended> Okay, we're back. Mr. Ehm, before we had a break for a change tape-- a tape change, we were talking about your chief engineer, and apparently that's how you got volunteered for the salvage _____. And then we were touching on the subject of reserve personnel on board.

Robert Henry Ehm: The- the captain, uh.. he-- the chief engineer out ranked our captain, but uh.. he was a reserve, and the chief engineer figured he could do the salvage better than the- the captain, and his name was White, Willy White.

Q: The captain was?

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Robert Henry Ehrm: Yes. W. W. White; he was also a lieutenant commander. And then the other officers, they were, uh.. CECs, and- and uh.. and they were reserves, too, but they were versed in salvage or something. And, uh.. comma- the- the chief engineer was the only, uh.. I- line regular academy officer I knew of.

Q: Okay. Now, I want to-- when you were talking about the officers, is that on the salvage crew or on the ship itself?

Robert Henry Ehrm: Well, they- after- we lived- we, uh.. enlisted men lived ashore on Ford Island. We had a house, and, uh.. they made two or three more bathrooms, and that was it. And I- I don't know where the officers lived, but- but they were all, uh.. they were, uhm.. and not having any uniforms on. We all wore tank suits and boots. A-- I didn't-- many years later, I found out Lieutenant Painter, who we thought was a sharpie, and he was a CEC officer. He wasn't a- yeah, he- he knew that kind of stuff. And of course, there was no, uh.. ceremony-- I mean, no, uh.. t- personnel inspections or anything like that. That's what...

Q: Your <inaudible>?

Robert Henry Ehrm: Oh, this was just work. However, we sailed the ship to Brem- we cleaned the ship up, and in June of, uh.. Ju- May and June of 1943, we sailed her across 3,000 miles to Bremerton. And then they started to-- and we-- regular Navy. And the chief engineer called us two divers up one day and he says, "Which one of you wants to go to Syracuse to G.E. main propelling engine school, nucleus crew?" And both of us says, "We don't want to go." And he said, "Okay. Ehm, you go." I said, "When?" "Be on transcontinental train tomorrow night." And I was-- <laughing> I was married then, and uh.. then I, instead of picking up a new DE, uh.. my orders changed, and I made Ensign. And I made Ensign just like I ma- became a diver. Just put the- put the suit on and- and I didn't kn- now, I'm a line officer, and I didn't know whether one or two, uh.. points of the star pointed down to the stripes. But it didn't look right to me, and I went back to the tailor, and I said, "Hey, this doesn't look right." "Yeah, that's right." So I looked up in life magazine, and he was wrong. <Laughing>

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Q: I mean, these things happen sometimes with life's little nuances. Do you have anything else about December 7th, about the West Virginia, that you remember, that you want to relay about the salvage operation?

Robert Henry Ehrm: No. Not- not really. That's- that's just about all the- that happened. Uh.. oh, one- one thing more. One of the torpedoes blew the rudder off, the 50-ton rudder. And, uh.. the diver, master diver sent me one day down to find it. By this time, the ship had-- was afloat, and it shifted a little bit, even though it had a four-point moore, and, uh.. the wind and the tide shifted a little bit. And the routine was to put a mushroom anchor down and the piece of line, go out about six fathoms, or about one fathom, and uh.. make a circle. And top side watched the bubbles and when you completed circles they, okay, pull another one out and then go around.

Q: Circle search.

Robert Henry Ehrm: So, I'm down there, and I got a pain under my heart. And I told top side, I said, I told the master diver, I says, "Hey, I got a pain under my heart." He says, "Aw, it's probably something you ate. Come on, get- get going." So I gave myself a shot of air, the cure-all, but there wasn't any air. This- the- the guy on the air compressor hopped in his boat, went over the Navy yard, and that was the end of his shift, and he got a diver down, and I don't know how many of my 8 minutes I got left. So I'm standing there waiting, and the routine was to- to balloon up to the surface and then tow you in. And this day, of course, I'm dead weight, no air. And they're pulling me up and they open my face plate. "You dirty son of ____," I says, <huffing> "No air." Oh. The master diver told them, "Bring up the diver." And I can just seen them finishing their cigarette and finally bringing the diver up. <Laughing> So, that was a-- I thought it was a close call.

Q: Well, it was. You survived, thankfully.

Robert Henry Ehrm: And, uh.. with that rotten, dirty water, if you scraped or any kind of a wound, it wouldn't heal for weeks and weeks. And months and months afterwards, uh.. having breathed that high-pressure air with the rotten air, and my pillow smelled terrible.

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Man 1: Mr. Ehm, if I could, I'd like to back you back up to the West Virginia on the 7th again, one more time.

Robert Henry Ehm: Okay.

Man 1: Before the salvage operations.

Robert Henry Ehm: All right.

Man 1: You're down at your watch station and you said the first thing that you heard that let you know something weird was the await [ph?] a fire and rescue party, right?

Robert Henry Ehm: Yes. That was the beginning.

Man 1: And eventually you make it up to the deck.

Robert Henry Ehm: Top side, yes.

Man 1: Was that p- was that aft or forward? Or mid ships?

Robert Henry Ehm: It was about mid ships.

Man 1: What did you see when you got up there?

Robert Henry Ehm: I just saw smoke and fire and airplanes that were- that were strafing and looked like- just like in the movies. You could see the bullets going across the-- see, uh.. we had wooden decks, uh.. teak. And incidentally, in the tropics, the-- those wooden decks were almost as white as this, and, uh.. we engine- <laughing> we engineers qu- didn't dare st- wear steaming shoes up even out of the, uh.. out-- into the compartment. And we had, uh.. coke [ph?] alley. We had a bunch of lockers. You put your steaming shoes in there and then put uniform dress shoes on to walk around on the ship. And, uh.. the engineering spaces were always clean and neat and, uh.. there in the machine shop, we took great pride in, uh.. great pride.

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And many years later, uh.. I met the tool room guy and, uh.. by this time he was retired. He was going to naval hospital with-- he had cancer, and uh.. I didn't know it and he didn't say. He said, "Oh, I just-- I go over there for checkup sort of thing." And he said, "You know, that was a good ship." And he says, "We tried to make our officers look good, you know, we enlisted men. And come to think of it, we did. They were happy and made us happy." Of course, we had a couple now and then, a couple- couple of bad ones, but yeah, we-- we really tried. That was a happy ship. Of the 13 ships I served on, that was the best one of all of them. She was a good ship.

Man 1: And again, to drag you back, you said you were up on deck when the Arizona went up?

Robert Henry Ehm: Yeah.

Man 1: Can you describe the sensation of that?

Robert Henry Ehm: Well, that was a loud bang, and I didn't know whether it was us or- or the Arizona or who. But, uh.. and there was-- but smoke and fire then, and then, after she blew up, and s- the burning fragments set us on fire so bad. And we had an airplane on number- number three turret, and it, uh.. it was-- a bomb landed on it, and it burning gasoline. Then, really on fire.

Man 1: Was that near where you were?

Robert Henry Ehm: And there was no-- there's no shouting, no panic or-- people were-- didn't-- a lot of them didn't do anything, me included. When they got top sided, there was nothing to do. So, I helped the wounded by whatever we could.

Man 1: How many people were in your division?

Robert Henry Ehm: Uh.. we had 60. But there were 400 total of the four divisions. M-main engine, E-electrical, B-boilers, and A-auxiliary.

Man 1: And how many friends did you lose that day?

Robert Henry Ehrm / Tape 414 Robert Henry Ehrm

Robert Henry Ehrm: Of the, uh.. eight of us in the machine shop, we lost three. W- and one- one of the kids is here to- here to- he went down instead of-- I went up and he went down, and he went down in the ice machines. And he knew that there was a storeroom down there they always kept locked unless they were playing poker. And I didn't know anything about that. But anyhow, this kid goes down, and that morning, a door happened to be unlocked so he could get out. Otherwise, he would have- would have been trapped down there. So, we lost three out of eight, including the other-- the guy in charge of the shop. He came from M division about six months before. We were both first class. I was senior to him, but the- the, uh.. I said, "You-- talk to- to the- do the paperwork and everything; I'll run the shop." That was fine by him. And he looked like Errol Flynn. He had an Errol Flynn mustache, and I had a cavalry type. <Laughing>

Man 1: What was your most vivid memory of December 7th?

Robert Henry Ehrm: I guess fighting my way up out of the machine shop through this wall of water coming down. Uh.. I guess that was my most vivid memory.

Man 1: That's your best memory of the West Virginia?

Robert Henry Ehrm: Yeah.

Man 1: What's your best memory of the West Virginia?

Robert Henry Ehrm: The best memory of the- of the West Virginia? Hmm. Uh.. gosh, I don't know. It is all-- looking back on it, it was all fair weather and- and, uh.. calm winds.

Man 1: Were you involved in any of the teams or anything like that, that the ships, the battleships had? Band, baseball, anything like that?

Robert Henry Ehrm: No. No. No. I was never in a race crew or boxing or any of that. We- we used to have a lot of boxing for recreation, and uh.. at various times we had the, uh.. battleship, commander battleship band, but I

Robert Henry Ehrm / Tape 414 Robert Henry Ehrm
don't recall them ever playing concerts. I-- maybe they played back in
officers' country. I don't know.

Man 1: What did you do for entertainment down at M division?

Robert Henry Ehrm: Uh.. played acey-deucy mostly. I was-- I w- acey-
deucy, I guess. Uh.. on the weekend, a kid from the evaporators, another
first class, he was at Midway, got shot up at Midway, but lived and retired in
Bremerton. And we used to play acey-duecy, and I would cheat <laughing>.
And he never-- well, once in a while he'd catch me, but I'd say, "Look, there-
there's an airplane," and move through the...<laughing>. That was fun. We
were having fun. Flurry [ph?] and Schooly [ph?]. And, uh.. he cashed in his
chips up in Clealum [ph?] couple of years ago, and I wore my uniform and
went to his funeral up there.

Man 1: Is there anything else you'd like to add for the record?

Robert Henry Ehrm: No. But, uh.. I'm- I fancy myself a battleship sailor.
When they put that, uh.. New Jersey and the Missouri in Commission, I
volunteered. And the secretary of the Navy said, "Hey, because you've been
out ten years," I was probably out 30 years by that time, "thanks but no
thanks." And, uh.. I did have an office on the Missouri when she was in the
reserve fleet. And, uh.. among other ships that were in the reserve fleet in
Bremerton, the West Virginia was there. And, uh.. we- we had watches, uh..
but I used to go aboard these ships just for, uh.. just to double check. I used
to go aboard the West Virginia. That <sobs> almost killed me. I hated to,
but by God, I went.

Man 1: She's still a living ship to you, isn't she?

Robert Henry Ehrm: Yeah. Now, that was-- oh, I loved my naval career. I
am going to wear my uniform tomorrow.

Man 1: Good for you.

Woman 1: Choker collar and all?

Robert Henry Ehrm / Tape 414 Robert Henry Ehrm

Robert Henry Ehrm: Yeah.

Q: Can you get the choker <inaudible>?

Robert Henry Ehrm: Choker- choker collar still in the- in the- I mean, I'm not out of uniform, am I?

Q: No. No, I don't think so.

Man 1: Can you define what a battleship sailor is?

Robert Henry Ehrm: Well, it's a home. Uhm.. I've had destroyer sailors come aboard a battleship. See, they're squat. They ain't the, uh.. steady gun platform. Uh.. they uh.. destroyer sailors, "Gee, how do you guys stand this slow, slow roll?" And I went aboard a destroyer, and I never got out past buoy number one here in Pearl, seasick. I used to sleep on top of the tubes with a- with a life jacket for a pillow, and of course, in those days, every once in a while, well, we rarely took our clothes off the first couple of weeks and months of that. And, uh.. boy, that was-- that was terrible. After coming from a- a battleship, we had ice cream once in a while <laughing>. On this destroyer, man, that was a-- that was a rough life. But, those guys, uh.. they- they thought it was great. And, uh.. well, same like- like submarine sailors. Boy, they, hey, that's the way to go. And I was with ship mates with an old, uh.. old hand on Guam after the war, and he said in a typhoon in the Philippines, they rolled 15 degrees at 200 feet, 15 degrees at 200 feet. <making grunting sound> That's not for me.

Man 1: <Laughing>

Q: Well, I'm sure once a battleship sailor, always a battleship sailor.

Robert Henry Ehrm: Yes, sir, sir.

Q: We'd like to thank you for your time and thank you for your service to the country.

Robert Henry Ehrm: Thank you for having me.

Q: Thanks.

Man 1: Privilege. Thank you. Don't get up too quick. We got...

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